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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Crime Crackdown in China

Summary

China has undertaken a massive campaign against crime in which thousands of people have been arrested and a large number executed. The crackdown stems from the perception of Deng Xiaoping and other senior leaders that there has been a breakdown in social order and discipline that threatens the party's rule. The campaign reaches beyond ordinary crime to social and political misbehavior as well, particularly among youth. Tough measures taken by local law enforcement and judicial authorities have, in many cases, gone beyond the bounds of due process as mandated under China's legal system. Such actions have created controversy within the party and government, vitiated the generally positive reaction to the crackdown among the populace, and deeply disturbed some of China's intellectuals. [redacted]

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Since last August, the authorities in China have been carrying out a harsh campaign against crime and social disorder. In the past few months thousands of persons, mostly youth, have been arrested in police sweeps through urban areas. Hundreds have been executed, often before massed audiences. The crackdown is continuing--embassy and consulate reporting

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[redacted]

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the China Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and questions are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Domestic Policy Branch [redacted]

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indicates a new wave of arrests and executions began in January. [redacted]

[redacted] a three-year campaign is planned. Ordinary street crime is not the only target; people have also been arrested for crimes of a political nature and even for behavior which, while not illegal, the security authorities find objectionable. Some in the party evidently have misgivings but editorials and speeches have firmly repudiated their objections. [redacted]

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China's "Crime Wave"

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The severity of the campaign attests to the leadership's conviction that China is facing a crisis situation that demands strong measures. Reliable crime statistics do not exist for China; however, in recent months the press has carried an unusually large number of stories about crimes. While the media coverage is certainly designed to support and spotlight the campaign, it probably also reflects a real crime problem. [redacted]

Generally, crimes fall into one of three categories: economic crime--including corruption, smuggling, profiteering; street crime--rape, murder, burglary; and crimes against social order. The final category includes crimes like rioting, viewing or selling pornography, and disturbing the peace. It also includes dissident activity, although this aspect is not discussed or admitted by the authorities. The social disorder category is exceedingly broad, giving security authorities an excuse for clamping down on activities, such as wearing long hair or dancing, which they dislike but which are not specifically criminal. [redacted]

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As in other countries, a disproportionate number of crimes are committed by the young. China's high unemployment rate, inadequate schools, the drift to the cities from the countryside, and the maturing of a generation severely disillusioned by the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath all combine to exacerbate youthful discontent. Increasingly this discontent has found its outlet in criminal and antisocial behavior; many unemployed urban youth have turned to robbery, prostitution, extortion or other crimes for a living. [redacted]

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Motives Behind the Crackdown

We believe the campaign stems from long simmering leadership discontent with social order and the performance of the security services in China. A number of stories as to what precipitated the crackdown are in circulation, ranging from an attack on Deng Xiaoping himself to impassioned pleas to the Politburo by crime victims. Whatever the case, it is clear that the campaign was begun at the highest levels of Chinese leadership and directed from the top down--Deng and Chen Yun are, as far as we know, the leaders most directly responsible for the initiative. They apparently were convinced that criminal behavior was getting out of hand and that emergency measures were needed. The resultant

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crackdown exemplifies the way in which China's decisionmaking structure concentrates authority not only over general policy but even over the details of its implementation in the hands of a very few elderly leaders. [redacted]

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While the authorities acted in part out of sincere concern over criminal disorder, the campaign is also driven by the party's need to repress dissident thinking and by a distaste for youthful attitudes and fashions--"crimes of attitude"--combined with the puritanical moral outlook of the aged leaders. We surmise that the leadership saw the crime problem as evidence that it was losing control of Chinese society in fundamental ways, particularly as regards those under 30--about two-thirds of China's population. The congruence of the anti-crime campaign with two other current campaigns--the rectification of the party and the movement against "spiritual pollution"--illustrates the broader aims of Beijing's policy. [redacted]

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The anticrime campaign has also been used to strike at political dissidents, though Chinese officials deny this. One case that attracted considerable attention was the arrest of several Tibetans whom the Dalai Lama claimed were dissidents who advocated greater autonomy from China. The US embassy reports that dissidents are clearly subject to arrest, but has no evidence any have been executed. [redacted]

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[redacted] the majority of arrests in at least one area were of leftists, suggesting [redacted] a factional element. [redacted]

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Propaganda has linked the anticrime campaign with class struggle and called criminals "class enemies," in Marxist terms the most dangerous enemies of socialism. This linkage is especially noteworthy because the thrust of the propaganda since 1981 has been that class struggle is of limited significance in socialist China. The language of these commentaries was extraordinarily harsh, reminiscent of the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution. Although we do not expect a recurrence of the turmoil of that era, bringing class struggle into the campaign raises the ideological and emotional stakes and reinforces the seriousness of the party's concerns. [redacted]

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Some evidence exists that factional politics, at both the highest and at lower levels, is involved. There have been indications that the top leadership is divided over the crime problem, with Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun taking a hard line and Hu Yaobang--Deng's designated heir--favoring a more liberal approach. [redacted] Hu favored restricting the campaign to common crime but that Deng, overriding him, insisted on adding the political dimension. [redacted]

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Some cadre reportedly believe that the sudden crackdown on crime represents a slap in the face to Hu's policies, which favored addressing unemployment and youthful disillusionment--the

causes of crime--as well as enforcement. They see a loss of confidence in Hu on Deng's part, and a concomitant loss of status, possibly even imperiling Hu's position. A recent story crediting Hu with initiating the campaign has begun to circulate, perhaps indicating an attempt by Hu's supporters to undercut this speculation and place Hu on the right side of the issue.

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Leading cadre at all levels, even the very highest, have been affected by another aspect of the crime crackdown, the attack on criminal activities of cadres' children and relatives. Delinquency by privileged youth has been a major problem in China at least since the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the latest crime drive, Deng Xiaoping has warned that no one will be able to hide behind influential parents--though [redacted] he warned the Ministry of Public Security off an investigation of his own children. Relatives of several top military and civilian leaders have been implicated in criminal activity. Even the Politburo Standing Committee has been involved. The US Embassy has heard [redacted]

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[redacted] a grandson of Ye Jianying was executed recently for plotting against Deng and that a nephew of Li Xiannian was shot, with his uncle's consent, for corruption.

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Attacks on cadres' relatives can be used as a weapon in factional infighting. At lower levels this tactic is common, and it has been employed at the national level as well. Beijing will have a great deal of difficulty preventing this abuse in its drive against crime, but serious inability to prevent it will discredit the campaign, heighten tensions already high because of rectification, and possibly dilute the long-term effectiveness of the crime crackdown. [redacted]

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The Scope of the Campaign

China has carried out periodic drives against crime and corruption since the Cultural Revolution, most notably in 1980 and 1981, but none has been as large-scale and intense as the current one. Information from throughout China indicates its severity. One estimate [redacted] puts the number of executions at 5000 since the start of the campaign. Fragmentary statistics support high estimates: for example, Embassy Beijing reports over 60 executions took place in that city during the first 20 days of January. Several cadres have referred to arrest quotas--levied by Beijing--which local security organizations have had trouble filling with genuine criminals. In some cases they have taken to arresting people engaged in minor public disturbances or who make injudicious political remarks.

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Moreover, security forces have used tough new tactics in carrying out the campaign. Some arrests have taken place in night-time dragnets; sometimes relatives are not informed for

several days. In Shanghai, police and PLA troops reportedly arrested more than 8000 people in September alone. Another wave of arrests was in progress in January according to consulate reporting. A public security official said that many arrests were made on the basis of lists submitted by local party secretaries. In Fujian, because police are arresting suspicious looking youths, Chinese residents have observed that barber shops are full of local would-be dandies getting haircuts.

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Some Chinese have reported the campaign has strained security resources, overwhelmed detention facilities, and clogged the fledgling legal system. According to a resident of Shanghai, PLA troops have been called on to assist in making arrests and guarding prisoners, even though this responsibility was supposedly taken from them and given to the resuscitated People's Armed Police last year. In one area, according to a security cadre, police have been using athletic fields as emergency detention centers; lack of food, housing, medical and sanitation facilities has reportedly resulted in some deaths.

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large shipments of prisoners to labor camps in Xinjiang strained the capabilities of the security apparatus in that province, requiring it to request additional funds and to call on the paramilitary Production and Construction Corps for additional manpower. In one group of 10,000 prisoners transported to Xinjiang, over 100 were executed en route, and an unknown number committed suicide.

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so-called "first-line Public Security cadre" are carrying out arrests; these first-line cadre are formerly unemployed urban youth who reportedly take a hard line toward suspects, particularly the offspring of China's privileged classes. police officials, when they make an arrest, have sometimes removed the suspect's name from his household register--a drastic move that in effect makes it illegal for him to reside in the city where his family lives.

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The mass arrests and Beijing's desire for speedy prosecution and punishment have placed a strain on China's judicial system. A legal official in Fujian,

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said that all work on other matters, including party rectification, had ceased because of the heavy load of criminal cases. The case load has not slowed the trial process, but only made it even more perfunctory than before.²

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²In China, a person brought to trial on criminal charges is assumed to be guilty. Trial proceedings are in many cases little more than sentencing hearings.

As part of the crackdown, tough sentences are being imposed for relatively minor crimes. People have reportedly been executed for pimping, prostitution, and robbery, while lesser crimes like pickpocketing and even disorderly conduct have earned transgressors exile to remote labor camps. Mild sentences are being reviewed and strengthened by higher level courts; in Zhejiang province, two criminals who appealed prison sentences of seven and five years were sentenced to death after a State Council order to stiffen punishments. One law enforcement official claimed that under the new policy, all nonpolitical criminals sentenced to life or death with a two-year reprieve--a common Chinese sentence giving the convicted a chance to demonstrate repentance--are to be executed. [REDACTED]

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Executions are often carried out immediately after sentencing, and sometimes in front of large crowds. A grim rumor has it that families of executed criminals must pay 80 yuan--more than the average worker's monthly wage--to recover the body. The free hand granted security authorities has also enabled them to take advantage of opportunities for corruption--some families are reportedly paying "fines" to local security personnel in exchange for their sons' lives. [REDACTED]

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Many youth are being sent to labor reform camps without any trial, some merely because they had served time in labor reform before. [REDACTED]

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The Societal Impact

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Public reaction to the wave of arrests and executions has been mixed. According to the Chinese press and some embassy reporting, the campaign is supported by the general populace, many of whom welcome the move as long overdue. Social status, education, and age affect the attitudes adopted toward the crackdown, with older, less well educated people more inclined to look favorably on it. Some express skepticism that the campaign will last long enough--or reach high enough--to diminish crime in the long run. Some party members and intellectuals, however, are concerned that legal processes are being overridden and that the innocent are being arrested along with the guilty. [REDACTED]

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The Sixth National People's Congress (NPC) adopted a new constitution last year; one of its provisions, which received heavy propaganda coverage, was the establishment of new legal codes and a return to the rule of law in China. But in September of this year the second session of the NPC promulgated revisions to the code that in effect suspended due process in the criminal realm and removed limits on maximum sentences for serious crimes. [REDACTED]

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There is considerable opposition within the party to the heavy-handed tactics of the campaign. The leadership is particularly sensitive to the charge that it has abandoned its commitment to the rule of law. In early December, Chen Pixian, Secretariat member in charge of legal and security affairs, defended the crackdown in a speech to the China Law Society. Chen frankly discussed some of the criticisms aimed at the campaign. He said there is a viewpoint that "the struggle has ruined overnight the newly established legal system" and that some people have labelled the campaign "feudalistic, vindictive punishment." His counter-argument--that the campaign strengthens the legal system because it helps to maintain order and because the people favored it--has been widely carried in the press. Some articles in the provincial press have criticized party members for harboring reservations about the crackdown. [REDACTED]

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China has also reacted sharply in its international propaganda organs to foreign critics of the crackdown, which have included Amnesty International and the foreign minister of Sweden. These replies have stressed two main points: that the problem is a Chinese one to be solved by Chinese in accordance with their own laws and traditions, and that all normal legal procedures are being followed. [REDACTED]

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Costs of the Campaign

Beijing claims the crackdown has had the desired effect of cutting the crime rate, but it also may have unintended consequences. Intellectuals' confidence in the party's commitment to the rule of law has been shaken, and their willingness to commit themselves to the reforms the leadership is counting on so heavily to modernize China is more open to question. There will be no overt opposition to the campaign but many will adopt a cautious, noncommittal approach that will do little to advance economic, governmental or intellectual innovation. [REDACTED]

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The abuses of the campaign and the use of the campaign to pay off factional or personal scores will add to the residue of conflict still remaining from the Cultural Revolution. Since many of the "crimes" involve urban youth and intellectuals, and since many of the security troops are drawn from uneducated unemployed youths, increased social tensions seem to be built into the conduct of the campaign. [REDACTED]

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The nature of the crackdown, its targets and its tactics, indicate that part of China's leadership is still hypersensitive to any perceived loss of control, suspicious of the young and their attitudes, and unwilling to confront or even acknowledge the deeper causes of declining social order. The party's old guard still harks back to a golden age and is ready to use heavy-handed tactics to maintain its vision of what China should be like--disciplined, committed to revolution, puritanical. [REDACTED]

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